

Jason Downer House
1201 North Prospect Avenue
Milwaukee
Milwaukee County
Wisconsin

HABS No. WIS-260

HABS
WIS
40-MILWA
20-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

JASON DOWNER HOUSE

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Location: 1201 North Prospect Avenue (northwest corner of North Prospect and East Juneau avenues), Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin.

Present Owner: La Tour Rivage, Inc.

Present Occupants: First and second floors, south end of the building--offices of Edward P. Rudolph, attorney; first floor, north end--suite of William MacArthur, interior designer; second story, north--offices and drafting rooms of Zarse and Zarse, Inc., architects, and offices of Nourse, Sterner and Assoc., The Executive Committee; third floor--not occupied.

Present Use: Offices, showrooms, studios, storage

Statement of Significance: Designed by a highly skilled local architect for a well known Milwaukee attorney, this ninety-five-year-old former residence is an appealing, relatively well-preserved example of the Victorian Gothic style.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1874. An article in the Milwaukee Sentinel for December 31, 1874, reports that the buildings erected in the city that year included a "fine brick residence, corner of Prospect and Division [now East Juneau Avenue] streets, for Judge Downer" and gives the home's cost as \$20,000.
2. Architect: Edward Townsend Mix, Milwaukee, is listed as the architect in the Sentinel story just cited. Mix (1831-1890) was born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut and was apprenticed for six years to Richard Upjohn, a New York architect who was a leading proponent of Gothic Revival architecture. He came to Milwaukee in 1856 after a period of practice in Chicago in association with William W. Boyington, architect of Chicago's famous Water Tower. During the course of his practice in Milwaukee, Mix produced a wide variety of buildings, ranging from flamboyant Victorian designs to meticulously correct Gothic Revival forms. He was particularly noted for his fine ecclesiastical architecture. His Milwaukee churches include All Saints Episcopal Church (WIS-265), Immanuel

Presbyterian Church (WIS-263), St. James Episcopal Church (WIS-255), and St. Paul's Episcopal Church (WIS-271). Commercial designs by Mix in Milwaukee include the 1876 Mitchell Building (WIS-156), and the Chamber of Commerce (now Mackie) Building (WIS-158), erected in 1879.

3. Original and subsequent owners: Originally a single-family residence, the building was erected for Jason M. Downer, and after his death on September 1, 1883, belonged to his widow Alcy Eliza Miner Downer. On her death it passed, in 1889, to Immanuel Presbyterian Church of Milwaukee and in accordance with the terms of Mrs. Downer's will was used as a rest home and guest house for Protestant clergymen. Early in 1966 Immanuel Presbyterian Church sold the home to James V. Welch, a Milwaukee land developer. Documents on file at Records and Research, 509 City Hall, identify the structure's owner of record since February, 1966, as the corporation named above.
4. Builders and suppliers: Not recorded
5. Original plans: None
6. Alterations and additions: The house appears to have seen relatively few changes over the years. Although the files of the General Office, Inspector of Buildings, include no building permits pre-dating 1966, it is certain that a number of alterations were made before then--among them, installation of a new roof, electricity, and a new heating system, removal of the small (3'-6" deep) porch on the north wall and the large (27'-2" long) and ornamental main entrance porch on the east elevation (both seem to have survived until at least 1950), and construction of the present main entrance porch. All building permits from 1966 on record mostly electrical work--changes in outlets and fixtures. In addition, since 1966 the exterior (brick walls and wooden trim) has been painted, a new door installed in the main foyer entrance to William MacArthur's suite, the rest room on the second (and possibly first) story remodelled, the upper portion of the main stairway's elaborate newel post removed, much of the interior repainted and carpeting and vinyl tile laid in the foyers, halls, stairways, and second-story rooms. At undetermined dates the entrances on north and west elevations were taken out of service and minor changes made in several basement windows. As recently as 1963 some of the Downer's furniture remained in the house, but it is no longer there.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Located on property that once belonged to All Saints' Episcopal Church, the Downer house stands near the eastern edge of an

area just north and east of downtown Milwaukee that was, one hundred years ago, a prosperous residential neighborhood. (A Milwaukee Sentinel story of March 27, 1875, described it as "the most sightly and valuable part of the residential population.") Milwaukeeans had begun building homes in the region, once called Yankee Hill, as early as the 1830's, but the finest houses were those erected during the period 1865-90, many of them, like Downer's, designed by E. T. Mix, who built his own residence here in the late 1860's. Today, most of the mansions are gone, replaced by apartment and office buildings, hotels, parking lots, and the like, and of the survivors, which number less than thirty, the majority have been converted into apartment and rooming houses, clubs, shops, and offices and, in the process, have been significantly altered. Downer's house, though no longer a residence, has seen fewer changes than most of its contemporaries and survives in reasonably good condition.

A native of Vermont, Jason M. Downer (1813-1883) studied law in Louisville, Kentucky, and in the early 1840's established what soon became a highly successful law practice in Milwaukee. In 1845 he served as proprietor and editor of the Milwaukee Sentinel; from 1864 to 1867 he was a justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court and during 1869-70 served as a circuit judge. Keenly interested in higher education for women, Downer was a benefactor of the Wisconsin Female College at Fox Lake and from 1866 to 1871 was president of the school's board of trustees. Both he and his widow left generous bequests to the institution, which later transferred operations to Milwaukee Downer College (since 1964 Downer College for Women at Lawrence University in Appleton).

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: An old photograph of the home, seen from the southeast, before removal of the original main entrance porch, is in the collection of the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission, 210 West Michigan Street. Interior views and details photographed before removal of the original furniture and the recent remodelling were published with Violet E. Dewey's article in the Milwaukee Journal for October 16, 1963. Two views of the house before remodelling including one showing the newel post before it was truncated appeared in Richard Perrin's The Architecture of Wisconsin. Photographs taken by the recorder in 1966, before the exterior was painted, are on file with the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

- Building permits and other records, 1950-1969, General Office, Inspector of Buildings, 1010 Municipal Building, Milwaukee.

Inspection of the building, August 27 and 29, 1969.

Milwaukee Sentinel Index, Local History Room, Milwaukee Public Library.

Palmer, Virginia A., research notes, 1965, in the collection of the recorder.

Records of ownership, Records and Research, 509 City Hall, Milwaukee.

b. Secondary and published material:

"Brevities," Milwaukee Sentinel, April 22, 1871, 4.

Dewey, Violet E., "Youth Enjoys Charm of Aged Mansion," Milwaukee Journal, October 16, 1963, Part 4, 1, 4, 10.

Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography, Madison, 1960, 108.

Dreschler, Ronald A., "The Downer of Downer Avenue," Historical Messenger of the Milwaukee County Historical Society, XXV, No. 2, June, 1969, 59-62.

"Jason Downer Home of Prospect Av. Sold," Milwaukee Journal, January 9, 1966, Part 7, 1.

"Mansion Set for Offices," Milwaukee Journal, March 27, 1966, Part 7A, 9.

"Milwaukee," Milwaukee Sentinel, December 31, 1874, 2.

Milwaukee City Directory.

"Our Churches," Milwaukee Sentinel, March 27, 1875, 2.

Pagel, Mary Ellen, "Historic Milwaukee Buildings," Historical Messenger of the Milwaukee County Historical Society, XXIV, No. 4, December, 1968, 99-101.

Perrin, Richard W. E., The Architecture of Wisconsin, Madison, 1967, 88, 93.

_____, Milwaukee Landmarks, Milwaukee, 1968, 75-76.

Withey, Henry F., and Withey, Elsie Rathurn, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased), Los Angeles, 1956, 423-24.

Prepared by Mary Ellen Wietczykowski
1111 North Astor Street
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
September 2, 1969

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The Downer house is considered to be one of the finest specimens of Victorian Gothic architecture in the city of Milwaukee. It is one of the few such structures remaining. The rich ornamental bracketing of the overhanging gable roof, the machine-carved verge boards, the wooden canopies over some of the windows, and the cast-iron balconies make it a photographer's delight. Although the building has been converted to offices, it retains much of its original charm.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The two-story structure measures 40 feet 4 inches wide by 81 feet 3 inches in length. It has an attic and a full basement.
2. Foundation: Milwaukee County limestone
3. Wall construction: The walls are cream-colored Milwaukee common brick, trimmed at windows, doorways and in belt courses with light-colored, cut limestone. The bricks are now painted a pale green. The verge boards, eaves, and porches have decorative woodwork painted the color of the limestone trim.
4. Structural framing: Masonry-bearing wall construction
5. Porches: The main entry porch on the east-southeast side of the building has been replaced by an open wooden porch and steps. The east-northeast entry has its original wooden porch. This porch has a gable roof, ornamental bracketing, simulated beam ends, and square columns with ornate non-classical capitals. The back stairs on the north have been removed, as have those of the canopied west-southwest entry. The latter had once given access to the main entry hall.
6. Chimneys: The house has three brick chimneys. The chimney at the north end of the house has a double stack.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entry (east-southeast) is set in an arch with a brick hoodmold having decorative limestone keystone and label stops. It has two

highly ornate, panelled, rust-colored, wooden doors. The larger panel of each door has a carved leaf-like ornament with a six-pointed star in the middle which has a floral center piece.

The door to the back vestibule (east-northeast) is set within a pointed segmental arch trimmed with a brick hoodmold having a decorative keystone and has a single, panelled, wooden door with two parallel lights and a wooden transom. The original porch remains at this entry. The back door (now unused) on the north is a panelled door having four lights and a curved, single-light transom.

The doorway on the west-southwest was another access to the front hall and is also not used today. This has a single door panelled with two vertical lights of etched glass; it has a wooden transom. A basement doorway on the north has been sealed up with brick.

- b. Windows: Most of the windows of the Downer House are double-hung, one-over-one, wooden units set within segmental or pointed decorative keystones and label stops similar to those over the doors, and having limestone sills. The basement windows are single units originally having two lights set in segmental or pointed arches. Some of these windows have been filled in, while others are evidently replacements, as they have only one light.

South elevation: The two-story bay window on the south has five windows at both the first and second floor levels. These differ from most of the other windows in that they are trimmed with limestone arches having decorative keystones rather than brick hoodmolds. The bay projection is topped by a cast-iron railing just below the third floor window, a triple unit set high in the south gable end.

East elevation: On the east there is a one-story bay window similar to the one on the south, but composed of only three windows. Immediately above this, on the second floor level, is a single window with an ornate canopy supported by richly-carved brackets. This canopy forms the base for a cast-iron balcony beneath the arched window of the east gable end. There are eight other windows on this elevation, three in the front wing (south) and five in the rear wing (north). The first floor window to the south of the rear entrance differs from the others in that it is larger and has a

stained-glass transom; the window immediately south of the front entry has a triple-hung sash. There are also gothic-arched windows trimmed with decorative verge boards in each of the two gabled dormers, one in the front wing and a smaller triangular one in the rear wing.

West elevation: Instead of a bay window on this side of the house, there is a rectangular projection with a gable roof and a second floor window with an ornate wooden canopy and cast-iron balcony like that on the east elevation. An oval window on the second floor lights the front staircase, and there are dormer windows similar to those on the east. The other windows on this elevation are typical of those throughout the house.

8. Roof: The steep hipped roof has a deck which was originally trimmed with metal cresting now removed. It is covered with dark gray asphalt shingles, which are not original. The framing is timber. The eave ends are boxed-in but have decorative simulated beam ends. The verge boards are ornately carved.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The main entry on the east elevation, southeast corner, leads into a small vestibule. This contains a statue niche with a marble base on the north wall and a window on the south wall. A pair of wooden, panelled doors with etched-glass lights set in a Gothic arch separate the vestibule from the front entry hall stairwell.

Double, panelled, wooden doors lead from the entry hall into the front parlor to the south, a room which occupies the entire front of the building. Of note is the white marble fireplace on the north wall of this room. The fireplace has Tuscan columns flanking the opening and a ceramic tile hearth. Above the fireplace there is a large mirror set in a richly carved hardwood frame.

Opposite the double doors to the front parlor is a single panelled door with glass side lights and a glass transom set in a Gothic arch. The arch and door are original; the side lights and transom are not. This door leads into what was originally the living room. This room has the east bay window unit

and features a marble fireplace. Double, panelled doors open from this room to the west into what was the dining room to the front hall. The dining room also has a marble fireplace. North of the dining room is the serving pantry and beyond it the original kitchen. A small room beyond the kitchen gives access to a short back hall and the rear (north) exterior doorway, now sealed.

On the east side of the house beyond the living room was the original library. It has a marble fireplace backed against that of the dining room. This room has the large east window with the stained-glass transom. A panelled door with two lights leads from the library into the back hall. Off of the back hall is the rear outside entry, a bathroom, pantry, kitchen and servants' stairs to the second floor. All of the first floor space has now been converted to office use.

- b. Second floor: A stairway leads from the front entry hall to the second floor. Above the front (south) parlor there is a large room with a marble fireplace. This room may have been either a second-floor sitting room or a master bedroom. From the second-floor foyer a hallway leads back to the rear or servants' stairs. The bedrooms and baths off of this hall have been remodelled into office space.
 - c. Third floor: Access to the attic or third floor was not obtained. The front stairs which led to the third floor have been sealed off. The back stairs give access to the space above, which probably was the typical Victorian ball room and servants' quarters.
- 2. Stairways: The carpeted main front staircase curves upward to the second floor, and the stairs then curve up to the third floor. On the first floor it has a large, darkly stained and ornately carved newel post from which an upper section above the railing has been removed. The basement stairs are located beneath the front staircase. A servants' staircase at the rear of the building connects the second floor with the back entry hall.
 - 3. Flooring: In the front entry hall there is vinyl tile of two foot squares of alternating black and white--not original. The other floors are of oak and have a parquet border that appears to be maple and birch. Most of the floors have been carpeted.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster. Of interest is the richly molded cornice in the front parlor and in the sitting room above it. There is also a star-shaped, molded plaster form, with floral infill around the base of the light fixtures in the main floor rooms and the second-floor sitting room. The majority of the walls are painted white.
5. Doorways and doors: The original panelled doors, now painted white, have wide, heavily molded trim, also painted white.
6. Hardware: Brass
7. Lighting: Electric
8. Heating: Central steam heat

D. Site:

The building sits on an irregular, wedge-shaped lot at the northwest corner of East Juneau and North Prospect Avenues. A parking area occupies most of the original back yard.

Prepared by John N. DeHaas, Jr.
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
September 10, 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were made during the 1969 Milwaukee Project which was sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, and the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission of the City of Milwaukee, Richard W. E. Perrin, Chairman. The project was done under the direction of James C. Massey, then Chief of HABS, and the team members included architect John N. DeHaas, Jr. (Montana State University), Project Supervisor, Mary Ellen Wietczykowski--now Mary Ellen Young--(Milwaukee Landmarks Commission), Project Historian, and student architects Larry Hermesen (Iowa State University), Roger Little (Kansas University), Thomas Sanford (Washington State University), and Donna Woodrum (Virginia Polytechnic Institute). The drawings were edited by HABS architect John Burns and the data prepared for transmittal to the Library of Congress by HABS editors Carolyn R. Heath, Mary Farrell, Candace Reed and Philip Hamp. Photographs were taken by HABS staff photographer Jack Boucher.